NATHAN IS A KINKY JAZZ LOVER

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NATHAN IS A DIRTY OLD MAN AND WOULD LIKE TO KNOW BIBLICALLY SHAYE COHN, THE JAZZ CORNET PLAYER IN TUBA SKINNY

by Alba Pratalia

Nathan was melting. Not metaphorically, not spiritually, not in the way the poets mean when they talk about *surrender to the music*. No—Nathan was physically dissolving into a human gumbo, his shirt clinging like wet wallpaper, his jeans conducting brine down to his socks, his very soul pickled in sweat. The New Orleans night was a sauna with trombones.

And there was Tuba Skinny, laying down apocalypse in ragtime. Shaye Cohn, cornet cocked like a pistol at dawn, legs beating time on the rickety patio boards—*thunk-thunk-thunk*—as if she was simultaneously drumming, dancing, and declaring war on gravity. She waw-wawed into that plunger mute like the horn was whispering dirty limericks only she could hear.

Nathan was supposed to be listening like a man of culture, nodding his head at polyphony and syncopation, but instead he had been transported to

the hormonal back-alley of his imagination. It wasn't PG-13. Hell, it wasn't even R. This was deep web smut territory: "Are you 18 or older? Click *yes* to continue." He clicked yes. Twice. And then again for good measure.

The music went from stomping to seducing, and Nathan's brain went straight to a National Geographic narrator whispering over images of mating wildebeests: *"Here, the cornetist raises her leg—note the ritualistic leather boot—and the male of the species begins to perspire uncontrollably, mistaking jazz for foreplay."*

Nathan reached for his drink. The glass slipped in his sweaty grip, nearly baptizing the patio floor with whiskey. He caught it, raised it, and muttered to no one in particular:
"Christ almighty, this is pornography in 4/4 time."

How would that little leg beat the tempo during a demonic dance of the beast with two backs? Would it kick like a mule in ragtime? Would it wobble like a

loose fan blade about to decapitate the whole room? Would it shake like the final dice roll in a Bourbon Street backroom, loaded and desperate?

Would it mean a thing? Oh yes. It would mean every damn thing—'cause if it don't got that swing, it's just Pilates with brass accompaniment.

Nathan knew this. Nathan *felt* this. Nathan was a very, very kinky man with a kinky head, the kind of man who'd sit in a sweaty jazz club and mentally choreograph how a cornetist's ankle flex would translate into the syncopated thrust of a midnight mattress session. He was the sort of bastard who could not hear a plunger mute without imagining it pressed somewhere decidedly unmusical, somewhere moist, somewhere sweaty.

He was drenched, straw hat sagging like a boiled tortilla, body sticking to the patio chair as if his skin wanted to sign a long-term lease there. His mind, however, was far from the physical plane. His mind

was in the realm of jazz-as-fetish, rhythm-as-copulation, leg-beat-as-invitation.

And as Shaye Cohn stomped, wobbled, kicked, and shook her way through a chorus, Nathan whispered into his drink:

"Baby, that's not just hot jazz. That's hot *jazzercise* of the soul."

So did Nathan conquer the heart of Shaye Cohn, or at least slide between those two lovely tempo-beating legs like a syncopated eighth note?
Nigga, *please*. Not in this universe, not in the mirror one, not even in the Marvel multiverse with three Doctor Stranges and a horny trombone.

Did Nathan at least go and say *hello*, maybe offer a sweaty handshake, mumble something about "great set, really swung"?
Nigga, come on—you know our Nathan. By the end of the set he was cross-eyed drunk, mumbling half-remembered Jelly Roll Morton anecdotes to a chair

that wasn't even occupied, and had to be physically folded, origami-style, into an Uber by a stranger who felt sorry enough to poke at his half-working phone screen.

Was it at least a short Uber ride, maybe back to the French Quarter, giving him that cinematic chance of bumping into Shaye later at some late-night bar? Nigga… seriously. Have you ever scrolled Booking.com or Airbnb around the Quarter? It's cheaper to rent a five-star suite atop the Leaning Tower of Pisa, complete with a gondolier and daily gelato delivery, than to crash within sniffing distance of Bourbon Street. Nathan? He was a broke-ass troubadour with a wallet emptier than a jazzman's promises. His crash pad was way the hell out in a no-name motel off a freeway ramp, next to a gas station that sold lukewarm burritos and condoms past their expiration date.

The only thing Nathan was bumping into that night was the sticky vending machine in the lobby, begging it for mercy and a Diet Coke.

He even tried to masturbate to her that night. Yes, sir. Crawled into the motel's suspiciously damp bedspread, pulled out the cracked phone screen, and did the tragic man's equivalent of striking oil: he googled. And lo, the algorithm delivered: pictures of Shaye sweaty enough, bosom glistening, trumpet clutched in righteous fury. For a man who grew up internetless, with only Sears catalog lingerie sections and the occasional sunbather glimpsed from a distance, this was already Olympus-level material.

The girl has *biceps*. Holy hell, *biceps*! And who wouldn't, lugging around a cornet, pouring lungs into brass, turning Bourbon Street into a battlefield? Those arms looked like they could bench-press Nathan and still have enough energy left to lay down a blues in B-flat.

But… nay. No miracle was forthcoming. Not that night. Not with his bloodstream operating like a pharmaceutical soup kitchen. Nathan was saturated in meds—mood stabilizers, tranquilizers, libido

assassins—the whole cocktail. He was like a savoiardo biscuit dunked not just in coffee but in coffee *and* rum *and* the bitter tears of Italian grandmothers, slowly turning into tiramisú. A limp, creamy dessert incapable of rising, no matter how much jazz tried to swing him into action.

So there he lay, sweating, scrolling, sighing. The room smelled like desperation and motel disinfectant. His hand gave up before his heart did.

He muttered to the ceiling fan:
"Even my dick's on meds, and the prescription is: *don't bother, brother.*"

It wasn't even a Motel 6. No, brother—this was a **Motel 5 ¾**, the Harry Potter knockoff of hospitality. Couldn't even hit the basement-level standard of Motel 6, and that bar was already limbo-ing at ankle height. A joint where the ice machine is just a bucket of vaguely cold water, the towels have the consistency of sandpaper, and the complimentary

breakfast is a vending machine Pop-Tart with the expiration date scratched off.

One of those establishments where you shower with socks on, then toss the socks in the trash immediately after—*a ritual sacrifice to the fungal gods*. Where the WiFi is advertised as "free," but what it actually does is repeatedly buffer the Google homepage until you remember you have a data plan.

And yet—ah, yet—there is a beauty in such hovels. The beauty being: you can stumble out of your so-called "penthouse suite" at 9 AM, eyes squinting, skull rattling like a snare drum, feeling like you've been trampled overnight by a dazzle of zebras on meth, and you will *never* lose your car. Because your rusty, oil-leaking, apocalypse-dodging hunk of automotive shame is parked right outside your door. Always. A trusty beacon of mediocrity.

Nathan did exactly that. He stepped out, wobbling, blinked at the Louisiana sun stabbing him like a hangover surgeon, shuffled one step further, and—

thunk—bumped chest-first into the trunk of his jalopy. He spread himself across the metal like a man reunited with a long-lost lover, mumbling, "Oh, there you are," before resting his cheek on the sun-baked lid as if it were a therapeutic heating pad.

The car didn't purr back. It coughed. But that was enough.

Wherever the hell he was—and Nathan had no recollection whatsoever of how he got Ubered there the night before, nor how he drove there the previous day—was far enough off New Orleans that the geography could've been labeled *Canada* or *Nepal* and no one would've argued.

He stood there, blinking into the light, hat wilted, shirt still performing its impression of a human swamp, and beheld the landscape: **perfect gray nothingness.** The kind that stretches coast to coast, stitched together by gas stations, strip malls, and billboards that only ever advertise either Jesus or personal injury lawyers. It was the kind of

nothingness that made you question whether you were in Louisiana, Arkansas, or some forgotten corner of purgatory where the devil outsourced the décor to a suburban planning committee.

Coffee and hot food? Easy. Even this wasteland could manage that. Step out, squint past the heat shimmer, and there's bound to be some establishment serving caffeine in styrofoam and eggs fried in recycled motor oil. They'd even hand you a bottle of hot sauce so acidic it could strip the paint off your car.

But asking it *not* to be a fucking Waffle House? "Oh, Mr. Fancy Pants," Nathan muttered to himself, staggering toward his rust bucket. "Now we're being picky, are we not? Next thing you'll want silverware that isn't slightly bent and syrup that doesn't come from a pump machine."

And sure enough, as his vision adjusted, the neon Waffle House sign gleamed in the distance like a lighthouse guiding drunks through the fog of regret.

But Nathan, against all odds and stomach acids, built up some shred of palate dignity. He cheered up the last two synapses still capable of running the "operate vehicle" program, gripped the wheel, and—miracle of miracles—drove straight past the Waffle House. He did it like a knight bypassing a wench who smelled of syrup and stale Marlboro Lights. He deserved better. His colon deserved better.

The next block corner offered salvation in its own greasy vernacular: some Dirty Joe's, or Greasy Sam's, or Poison Bill's—the kind of place that advertised "Best Burgers in the County!" on a banner that had been flapping since Carter was president. Nathan parked (meaning his car ended up diagonally across three spaces and one bush), stumbled inside to the *ching-ching* of the doorbell, and was greeted with the holy trinity of diner liturgy:

"Morning, love, I'll be with you in a minute."

He slid into a booth. Because that morning, somehow, against biology and circumstance, he felt *more dignified than the counter.* A booth, baby. Vinyl throne.

But then—he noticed a figure at the counter. The silhouette. The shorts. The biceps. The leather boots. Was that…? Could it be…? Shaye Cohn?

Hahhahahahhhahhaha.
Not a chance in all the compounds of all the parallel universes stacked end-to-end like pancakes at, yes, a Waffle House.

Would you imagine that? Like some fucking Hallmark jazz rom-com: *"Cornet Love in Louisiana"*. Nathan would stumble in, she'd spin around on the stool, hair in soft focus, and he'd say something impossibly stupid about syncopation as love language. Cue montage. Cue trombone solo. Cue marriage.

What the fuck would a jazz genius be doing within a hundred-mile radius of Nathan? No. Not possible. Not even theoretically plausible. Jazz, sure, jazz feeds on despair, misery, cigarette smoke, and chili dogs at 2 A.M. Jazz can live at a Greasy Joe's. But jazz *next to Nathan*? Jazz making eye contact with Nathan?

Impossible. Contradiction. Paradox. The kind of glitch that tears open the space-time continuum and summons physicists to scribble on blackboards until their chalk stubs dissolve. Because the first law of the universe is **Nathanness**—and Nathanness means: the one woman you want most is always in another bar, another town, another timeline.

So Nathan looked again.
Nope. Just some trucker's wife with cornet-biceps and a pancake stack in front of her.

The booth sighed beneath him. Dignity dissolved back into vinyl.

Waitress: *slides the mug closer, tilts the pot, coffee glug-glug-glugging into it* "Morning, sweetheart. May I start you up with some coffee?"

Nathan: *smiles, nods, steam rising between them like a stage effect* "You know, your calling people 'sweetheart' sounds so sincere. A broken head like mine hears it like you actually mean it. And sincerely… it makes a difference."

Waitress: *without missing a beat, still pouring* "But I do mean it, sweetheart."

Nathan: *looks up at her, eyes a little bloodshot, a little boy-lost behind them* "I am the bottom, am I not? Like… the sorriest, most pitiful 'sweetheart' you ever had to sweetheart?"

Waitress: *snorts softly, puts the pot back on the hotplate* "Hey, handsome, what's this talk? I could feed you, fuck you, and feed you again, and send you back on the road, cowboy."

Nathan: *his head tilts in the full "giggity-scan" way, pupils dilating like a kid in a candy store*

Waitress: *conspiratorial grin* "I know, I know. I'm not in my 'fuck-the-traveling-guy' days anymore. But if I was in my days, mind you…"

Nathan: "No, no, no, what are you… you're gorgeous. I mean, I couldn't dream…"

Waitress: *a flicker of embarrassment, looks away, wipes an invisible stain off the counter with a napkin*

Nathan: *mirrors her silence, runs a finger along the Formica, tracing invisible shapes, tries to peek at her without getting caught*

Waitress: *finally looks back at him, eyes softer now, less playful, more human*

For a second, the diner hum faded. The fry cook's spatula paused mid-scrape. A jukebox in the corner hiccuped between country songs. Two strangers,

hungover and overcaffeinated, sat inside their own little booth-sized pocket of alternate reality—neither a proposition nor a confession, just a still frame of what-could-have-been.

Had she been some twenty-five years younger, maybe—*maybe*—she could've been Nathan's mother. But right now? Right now she looked like she could've been his grandma's elementary school teacher, the kind of woman who taught cursive with a ruler in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

Her line—*"I'm not in my 'fuck-the-traveling-guy' days anymore"*—wasn't just an understatement. It was understatement in the cosmic register, the way Keith Richards might shrug and say *"I might've taken a couple of sniffs"* while standing on a mountain of Peruvian powder tall enough to ski down.

And that—THAT—was Nathan's fate. Nathan's destiny. Nathan's flavor of alien contact. Forget little green men, UFOs, or glowing lights over

Roswell. No, Nathan's third kind encounter was always, inevitably, the waitress at **Dirty Joe's of Nowhere Parish**, dropping cryptic lines while her varicose calves did a soft-shoe behind the counter.

The universe, in its infinite jest, reserved these *end-of-the-world meetings* for him. Every time he thought romance might slink in wearing leather boots and carrying a cornet, the cosmos flipped the script and sent him a woman whose best pickup line was: *"Refill, sweetheart?"*

Nathan stared into his mug, steam fogging his glasses, and whispered like an astronaut radioing Houston:

"This is it. Contact. Pure, undiluted, Nathan-brand alien diplomacy."

Had he could, Nathan would have at least tried. Not even out of lust, not even out of desperation—simply out of **courtesy**. Because to Nathan, seduction was less about getting laid and more

about not leaving someone's line hanging in the air like an unanswered phone call.

But the meds. Oh, the meds. They cut the attempt before it even crawled out of the trench. Snuffed out the very first spark, like an air raid over a flickering candle. Nathan was left in no-man's-land, pants zipped, intentions foiled, dignity wobbling on the edge of absurd.

And yet, the question lingered like smoke: **would it have worked?** Strip the meds away. Imagine Nathan as a fully functional adult male with his so-called machinery operational. Would the cosmic gears have aligned?

The answer: probably not. Because even biology—the old lizard brain, the hormones, the animal inside—has **limits**. Guardrails. Barriers for self-preservation. Nature itself sometimes whispers: *"Brother, this is not the hill you want to die on. Nor the mattress you want to creak on."*

So what would've been worse? To refuse her outright, to decline the invitation like an impolite guest at the buffet of life? Or to show up anyway, step on stage, and forget the monologue? To face the crowd, lift no spirits, and give the weakest, softest, flattest speech biology had ever delivered?

Nathan knew the horror: not to fail in silence, but to fail mid-performance. To rise (barely), then deflate like a trombone mute dropped in a puddle. To be incapable of making the speech **hard**.

That thought alone was enough to make him gulp the coffee like it was cyanide.

The Italians say *"Fuga all'Inglese."*
The French say *"Filer à l'Anglaise."*
Both mean the same thing: vanish like smoke, slip out the side door, disappear with elegance, as though Houdini were your maître d'.

And that's what Nathan did. No melodrama, no grand goodbye, no cowboy wink. He just left a little

green on the table—enough for the breakfast he didn't even order, plus a tip, plus tips on the tip like he was tipping a whole conceptual idea of dignity. A financial smoke bomb.

Then he elegantly extracted his unit—meaning his sorry, trembling self—from the battlefield. A retreat, not a surrender. An invisible withdrawal carried out with all the grace of a deserter who still salutes the flag on his way out.

He slid back into his battered four wheels + engine + steering wheel (the bare minimum definition of "car"), collapsed into the seat, and coaxed the beast into life. The engine coughed, sneezed, and belched a puff of existential despair, but it caught. Just barely.

Nathan patted the dashboard like it was an old war buddy and muttered,
"Fuga all'Inglese, my friend. Fuga all'Inglese."

And off he went, wheezing down the endless gray nothing strip of America, the diner shrinking in his rearview like a bad dream you weren't sure you actually had.

And Nathan stomped foot on gas and accelerated towards: **away from here.**
Filer à l'Anglaise. Leave the scene not with a bang, not with a whimper, but with the screech of bald tires coughing dust into the morning air.

Time passes under sofas, Nathan knew this. Time hides there, rolled up with lint, dried crumbs, the odd button, the lost earring, enemy number one of all the vacuum cleaners in the city. And that's where Nathan ran his academy, underground, clandestine, lecturing to dust bunnies under the glassy gaze of Bohemian crystal chandeliers stolen from dreams.

Meanwhile, City Hall kept repainting the tramways. Over and over again. Like Sisyphean decorators, like municipal monks illuminating manuscripts in the margins of concrete. And people? They grew too

used to it. Shrugged, stepped on the new paint, scuffed it immediately, as though rebelling against freshness itself.

“Yes,” Nathan muttered to his own rearview mirror, “but as for us, we can be done without.”

Escape into life—who knows? Maybe that’s exactly the quintessence. Not salvation, not triumph, not even sex with cornetists in leather boots, but the **flight itself.** The act of stomping the gas and accelerating into *elsewhere.*

“Yes,” he repeated, “but as for us, we can be done without.”

The road blurred. His head buzzed. Dust whirled through the open window. Somewhere in the upholstery of the car, time gathered like under a sofa, humming softly.

Yes, time passes even under sofas.

Driving to no place relaxed Nathan the way a noose relaxes a condemned man: at least you know the end is sorted.
The road stretched gray and infinite, no landmarks, no destinations—just pure American limbo.

So he let his brain uncoil and reached for the journalist's toolkit: the **Five W's.**

Who was Nathan?
A pile of meds in a human trench coat. A straw hat with sweat stains holding up a body. A rumor someone spread about himself until it stuck.

What was Nathan?
Biology wrapped in sarcasm. A bar tab wearing shoes. A question mark that somehow kept farting out answers no one asked for.

When was Nathan?
Right now, apparently. Earlier, possibly. Later, doubtful. Nathan existed mostly in the *almost*, never fully pinned to a calendar.

Where was Nathan?

No, really—where the fuck? He glanced at the road signs, none of which made sense: Exit 17A to *Somewhere*, turnpike to *Elsewhere*. His GPS said "searching for signal" like it had given up on him. The only certainty: he was driving toward not-here.

And the most important: Why Nathan?

Not "Why did Nathan do something?"—that implied action, intent, coherence. The bigger, nastier one: *Why Nathan at all?* Why the very concept? Why did the universe cough him up and keep him around? What cosmic error required this Nathan placeholder to exist?

He muttered it aloud, the way some pray:
"Why… Nathan?"

The windshield didn't answer. The steering wheel didn't answer. Only the car coughed once, twice, like it was laughing.

Oh, oh—what's happening right now?
Something's stirring. Something's rising. *Right now, partner? Well, you're the one holding the reins.*

Nathan pulled the jalopy over onto the gravel shoulder, heart racing like he was being chased by the highway patrol of his own loins. He raised his hips, shimmied his pants down, and took the matter firmly in hand. No finesse, no ceremony—just pure, deranged carnival barkery: **Welcome to Nathan's Amusement Park.**

He opened his phone. Google Images. Typed in the only prayer he knew: *Shaye Cohn*. And there she was, frozen forever mid-solo, sweat shining, cornet cocked, thighs flexed like marble carved by horny angels.

Nathan went to business like a man possessed. No jazz historian, no critic, no fanboy—just raw biology with a shaky data connection. And when it happened—when it finally, *mercifully* happened—it happened so hard he **mooed like a calf.** A *moooo*

from deep in the gut, farmyard salvation blasting through his lungs.

The climax fried him like a thunderbolt. He banged his forehead against the steering wheel in an instinctive attempt to ground the electricity. Each thump set off the horn:

HONK. HONK. HONK.

A symphony of orgasm and traffic warning. The sound of a dying cow in a clown car.

He squirted everywhere—across the seat, the dash, but mostly saturating the carpet in front. A baptism of shame. A relic. A stain that would outlive him. He never cleaned it. Not once.

That car carried the fossil of Nathan's Shaye fantasy to its grave.

He looked at the screen. At her, lips pressed to the cornet, cheeks full of holy brass air. And in that moment—maybe the haze of orgasm, maybe the

meds finally aligning with the whiskey—she seemed to smile. Not at the crowd, not at the band, but *at him.*

Nathan laid his sweaty forehead against the cracked glass of the phone, leaving a greasy halo like a saint of perversion. He closed his eyes, breathed her in through pixels and bad resolution, then kissed the screen. A wet, shaky kiss that tasted of salt and battery heat.

"Thank you," he whispered. His voice cracked. "Thank you sincerely."

And right then—*swear to Christ, Buddha, and Benny Goodman*—her leg moved. Just a little tempo stomp. Just a tiny thud of leather boot on unseen stage. But Nathan knew. Oh, he **knew.**

That stomp was for him. For his lonely jalopy confessional, for his calf-moo climax, for his ridiculous existence barreling down nowhere highways.

It was a private encore, beamed across the void of Google Images, a gift from the goddess of cornet and sweat.

Nathan smiled back at the glass, insane and grateful.

Shaye Cohn, wherever she was in the universe—maybe on Frenchmen Street, maybe in some sticky dive bar, maybe in Nathan's fever-soaked imagination—paused for half a beat. She felt it. Not in words, not in thoughts, but in the strange, skin-prickle way musicians sometimes feel the audience breathing with them.

Fluids had been spilled. Not sweat, not bourbon, not trumpet spit. Something stranger, more indecent, more embarrassingly devotional. She couldn't name it, didn't want to. But she knew.

Without breaking the set, she tilted the cornet, popped the spit valve, and let her own offering drizzle out. Metal met floor with a wet *pffft.* Balance restored.

And then—onward. She kept blowing. Kept stomping her foot at tempo: **thump, thump, thump.** The wood floor quaked under her leather boot, echoing in Nathan's chest miles away.

The plunger mute wavered in her hand, up and down, side to side, the horn moaning: **waw, waw, waw.**

Somewhere on a no-place highway, Nathan felt the vibrations sync with his pulse. And for a delirious instant, he was sure they were in duet—her cornet, his madness, one great cosmic jazz filth riff that only they knew was happening.